

Gender Issues and Women Participation in Disasters

November 29-30, Vigyan Bhavan, New Delhi

REPORT

First India Disaster Management Congress

If we are to shift the focus from relief to disaster reduction, scaling up women's participation is essential. A wide range of innovations and policy initiatives emerged.

Speakers & participants alike recognized that:

Scaling up women's participation is the key to sustainable disaster prevention and preparedness.

Mainstream interventions for disaster reduction should essentially build on existing resilience demonstrated amply by women and poor communities.

The new approach will recognize & provide policy support to women as key actors in disaster risk reduction instead of perceiving them as victims.

This approach will address gender concerns, provide space for women as decision makers, to minimize wastage and maximize the returns on investments in infrastructure & development. Calling for Government and international agency support for Gender & Women's Participation :

- Provide women adequate representation at all levels of decision making
 - Enhance access to women's SHGs or Self Help Groups to capacity building opportunities & for resources for livelihoods
 - Ensure that women SHGs play key roles in recovery plans for housing & basic services towards sustainable development.
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'It is time for a paradigm shift from relief-centric and post-event response to having a holistic approach to deal with calamities... and move to a robust regime that lays greater emphasis on preparedness, prevention and mitigation working in close collaboration with the corporate sector, community-based organizations and the scientific and academic community... when communities are involved in design and implementation of disaster mitigation and reconstruction efforts, such participation enhances sustainability and ownership. Without it, solutions often fail to solve stakeholder problems.'

The Prime Minister, Dr.Manmohan Singh at the First India Disaster Management Congress.



Prime Minister Inaugurates the First India Management Disaster Congress



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The session was viewed as a platform for debate using presentations that highlighted the role of women in response and rehabilitation esp. after the tsunami and the floods in Western India.

It was heartening to note the many examples of interventions from floods in Maharashtra, W.Bengal, Orissa and tsunami in Tamilnadu stressing the need to recognize the role of women as responders and actors in relief and rehabilitation.

Dr Vinod Menon, Member NDMA, in his opening remarks, stressed that the entire process of disaster management needs to be Reshaped.

Women as First Responders

"One blanket does not fit all." In the relief phase, cash compensation/assets should be actually routed thru women's groups.

Post tsunami, the conventional damage assessments did not include economic losses —loss of livelihoods, loss of household assets etc and further, groups eg. Dalits, tribals and farmers were neglected, as the focus was on fishing communities. Need for government to mandate joint ownership of land and house titles and property.

Practical needs, of women and girls, do not get counted. Besides, strategically involving women in relief phase could reduce corruption, ensure information flow to affected citizens and hold agencies and Panchayats accountable.

PRESENTATIONS

Presentation that highlights the need for a shift in disaster policy and intervention. With respect to clear recognition that gender dimension to disaster response is important. Practical needs, of women and girls, do not get considered when a disaster strikes due to emergency response based on formula of one-blanket fits all. Besides addressing practical aspects, strategically involving women in relief phase could reduce corruption, ensure information flow to affected citizens and hold agencies

Restoration of normalcy is not the best way to respond in disaster situation. Disaster offers an opportunity for not only bring ing back normalcy, but also Building Back Better.

Experience showed that wherever women's self help groups were supported in large numbers by the government the results are tremendous in changing the status of women, in reaching information to communities and in some cases, reducing corruption and bringing efficacy in the rehabilitation process. To illustrate, 2400 self-help groups with Rs. 40 crores worth loans, in tsunami affected Nagapattinam district had turned the tide for these communities. They were the best advocates for livelihoods restoration and asset building initiatives.



A government official in her speech clearly identified that deaths and identification of women and senior citizens are not taken care of. The actual data compilation and social assessment can be done only by those closes to the community and people. This gives opportunity for women's groups, Gram Panchayats and CBOs to intervene properly.

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Collective Action - Women SHGs

Self help groups implemented search and rescue, community kitchens, grain banks, provided credit addressed health water and sanitation in village level, identified livelihoods, formed disaster task forces etc. on an informal basis.

Women's groups faced extreme opposition from traditional male dominated community leaders, but NGOs were crucial in bringing women out and in involving them in community roles.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Disaster Preparedness & Prevention

- Position women as key actors in DRR initiatives
- Build on adaptive / risk sharing capacities of women and their organizations
- Women consultations mandatory for preparing community based disaster management plans

Policy & Governance

- Gender disaggregated data for multi-level policy planning and preparedness (NSS, Census)
- Adequate budgetary provision (of at least 10%) for vulnerability reduction measures benefiting women
- Adequate representation of women in disaster management authorities at all levels
- Social audit of programmes/funds for ensuring equitable access
- Design Relief & Compensation Packages for Women and Girls
- Joint ownership of assets a precondition of rehabilitation
- Formal responsibility to SHGs & CBOs for handling relief –volunteers, cash assistance, shelter management, food procurement & supply, para-medical teams, etc .

Facilitators or Doers?

Post tsunami response demonstrated once again that technical assistance professionals, NGOs and international donors should take on facilitation instead of playing implementing roles. By reducing women to project beneficiaries, and percentages it undermines their potential role in disaster reduction.

The tsunami offers under-utilized opportunity to reduce risk by strengthening NGOs as **facilitators** and grassroots women's groups as **managers** in disaster reduction.

Communication

- Ensure transparency & reduce corruption through information flow & redressal mechanisms
- Access to communication tools to ensure last mile coverage in early warning systems for preparedness
- Train PRIs to integrate risk reduction in development works

Livelihoods, micro finance & Insurance

- Involve women to ensure in design, management & maintenance of community infrastructure and assets
- Financial products and sustained investments for livelihoods & enterprise promotion
- Affordable & responsive life & non-life micro insurance for assets, livestock, crops etc.



Excerpts from World Disasters Report—2006

Women's Community Role

Following all disasters, formal teams are set up in camps, villages and at higher administrative levels to manage disaster response. But these often lack gender equity because:

- Socially constructed restrictions on mobility — especially regarding female safety— may prevent women from participating.
- Approval is needed from a father/husband/brother for women to engage in activities outside the immediate family.
- Responsibility for multiple roles (e.g., domestic, childcare) leaves women little time for activities outside the home or workplace.
- Officials may lack gender awareness and see no need to engage women.
- Women themselves often lack confidence to play a public role — especially in male-dominated disaster management.

These barriers hinder women's participation in formal recovery — so specific measures are necessary to include women. Gender-aware NGOs and civil society groups have improved women's engagement in relief and recovery, but these efforts remain largely isolated and insufficient.

Source: World Disasters Report 2006, IFRC

Rising Above the Water

Tamil Nadu, India. Sasikala, Mari and Janaki are three women's leaders who formed self-help groups after surviving the tsunami of December 2004. A year later, when heavy rains and floods afflicted Tamil Nadu state, they found themselves wading for 15 kilometres through water a metre deep, holding hands to avoid falling into potholes, evading water snakes and creepers to provide emergency relief to the people of Poovalai, one of the worst affected villages.

They went against the advice of men who warned that nearby villages were marooned and reaching them by foot would be dangerous. But these tsunami survivors knew how to take control of their lives in the wake of disaster. "When the tsunami struck, people from outside helped us rebuild our lives. We decided it was time to act quickly and help our neighbours in whatever way we could," they said. "If we found it so difficult even to visit the villages, imagine the plight of the villagers who live there"!

The women raised money to buy food and prepared 650 food packets. The youth team and local men helped them distribute the food by boat. It became a well-coordinated relief effort which lasted several days.

For more details please visit:
www.disasterwatch.net